

# Back to School, Back to the Fight

by NaShonda Cooke



As an elementary school teacher and a mother of two amazing little girls of my own, I hear the name, “Mom” at least 50 times a day. It is one of the sweetest sounds.

What is the definition of a mother? Merriam-Webster’s latest version offers two interesting entries: (1) a female parent or a woman of authority, and (2) something that is an extreme or ultimate example of its kind especially in terms of scale. For example, the *mother* of all science fair projects.

In the comfort of my own home, I embody both of those definitions. My daughters depend on me for everything. Their meals, bath time rituals, payment for field trips, and a safe and comforting house to come home to are just a few examples. I am their provider and their guide to navigate through this world. I am a female, a parent, and the influence I have over their lives is humbly profound.

That’s really not different from my responsibilities to my students in my classroom. For the past 16 years, over 7 hours a day, it has been my calling to steer students and provide them with the most appropriate and meaningful daily experience possible. I am not the parent in this scenario, but I do have quite an affect on these young minds. I am preparing them with the necessary skills to be self sufficient and positively navigate and even improve society. It’s a huge and sometimes overwhelming responsibility to help them maximize their true potential. My calling as a mother and teacher is to simply do one thing: lead. The same characteristics that have created a caring, giving mother have created a caring and

giving educator. I'm not saying you need to be one to be the other, but the similarities are so obvious. Both are a phenomenal honor.

In order for me to do my job, in order for anyone to do their job effectively, the right tools are necessary. Unfortunately, it is an understatement to say I am not being provided with adequate tools. The North Carolina General Assembly believes I am a miracle worker. While I do believe in miracles and do think I am a pretty good teacher, no one can do their job empty-handed.

In recent years, I, my coworkers, and my daughters' teachers have been asked to do so much more with so much less. Teacher assistants are disappearing, class sizes are growing, textbooks and objectives are inappropriate and out of date, and technology is lagging.

Testing has taken over true instruction. How can I prepare my students to be accountable for information if I am not given the dignity to deliver the message at a pace that allows them to make connections and gain mastery?

Who came up with the idea of time-bound absolute proficiency anyway? Sometimes a student comes to me not speaking English or maybe he or she is reading well below grade level. Proficiency and mastery in my eyes is the growth they make that year. I celebrate all accomplishments! Big, small, every day, in every way. I do the same with my daughters. My oldest has worked diligently all year growing in her math skills. She stayed consistent and showed improvement. Her end of the year score was a two. We celebrated that two like it was a five. Her effort and resilience means more to me than a number. All our schools and students can benefit from a "growth mindset".

Who is behind this destruction of one the world's most vital professions? Who is refusing to fund the schools? Who is firing and pushing the country's best educators out of a calling? I guess the more important reason is . . . why?

Next question, what can we do about it? I'll tell you what. Speak out! Keep speaking out. Who better to improve public education than public educators? From the first day of preschool to the very last day of a student's 12<sup>th</sup> grade year, who knows their academic needs better? Who knows how he/she would learn best?

Who knows what that student needs? The teacher. So why are we allowing legislators make these decisions that have proven to be catastrophic?

We can no longer stand by hoping and wishing. Parents do not give up on their kids' best interests, and teachers should not complacently stand by and watch our students' potential sold off to the highest bidder. It's time to march, make phone calls, write letters and keep doing all of those things and more. Our students' lives are at stake. Who's with me?

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